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**«The Honour of the Holy Roman Pontiff
is the Honour of the Church - to me it
is more precious than life». De Mazenod**

The dawn of a new century is generally the occasion for great rejoicing. It was not so however for the Catholics of Europe, and especially those in France, during the ebbing days of the year 1799. They had lived through the infamous Reign of Terror of the French Revolution. They had been shocked by the new religion inaugurated by the extremists which closed the churches, approved the marriage of priests and abolished the Sunday. They were witnesses to the desecration of hallowed Notre Dame, where the Goddess of Reason was enthroned with strange rites. But their Catholic hearts were broken when the Supreme Pontiff, Pope Pius VI - the Vicar of Christ - was seized by anti-clericals and carried a prisoner through the cities of Italy to Valence, where in captivity he succumbed to his pains and grief - and where he lay for four months before a public funeral was permitted during the final hours before the dawn of the 19th century.

These events foreboded ill for the Church in the 1800's, and a pall of gloom descended in the first decade when a second Pontiff, Pope Pius VII, was taken as a prisoner to Savona and later to Fontainebleau where he was tyrannically persecuted by Napoleon.

These indignities to which the Vicars of Christ were subjected reflected the religious void in the souls of the multitude. Men's hearts had become chilled, their minds dulled and their morals shrivelled. It would seem that the ancient faith of Europe was to be submerged in the welter of class-hatred, selfishness and injustice.

But God, as He had solemnly promised, was in the barque of Peter. This time, when it was for the honour and glory of His Church. He would change stones into bread. He would make use of these same tragic events to mould the hearts and souls of new apostles. He would give to His Church men whose lives and deeds would be of world-wide effect - men whose influence would defy time and tide in the building of spiritual empires.

Chosen Souls

Two of these chosen souls lived in the South of France in the midst of the events we have mentioned. One was John Vianney - later the Curé of Ars-who was 14 years old in 1800, and the other was Charles Joseph Eugene De Mazenod, who was 18 years old when the new century dawned.

Of particular interest to us this morning is De Mazenod because he was the founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

In the Providence of God the two incidents which decided his vocation were the outrages to the person of the Holy Fathers, Pope Pius VI and Pope Pius VII. His youthful soul charged with a special grace begged God to use him to vindicate and uphold the honour of the Supreme Pontiffs. God inflamed his soul with the consuming desire to completely sacrifice his life for the glory of God and the cause of Christ's Vicar on earth. That sacrifice he generously made as he entered the Seminary of St. Sulpice in 1808. He was ordained a priest three and a half years later.

The first four years of his priesthood witnessed the military triumphs and genius of Napoleon reach their zenith. Again through the Providence of God it was the military triumph of the Revolution which

influence Father De Mazenod to found a community. If Napoleon could sear the hearts and minds of his well trained army with a loyalty and devotion that conquered nations, why could not a priest of God sear the hearts and souls of an army of priests with a loyalty to God and His Vicar on earth that would conquer souls and triumph over the evils of a world. One year after the death of Napoleon a new General-Charles De Mazenod-became the inspired leader and the apostolic founder of the spiritual army of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

On the morning of profession with his first four priests he knelt in silent meditation before his Eucharistic King. Suddenly these flashed on his memory the tragic images of Pius VI and Pius VII - Supreme Pontiffs - Vicars of Christ - successors to Peter, in their degrading captivity. He turned to his confreres and voiced an aspiration that was to be the glory and tradition of his community. « the honour of the Holy Roman Pontiff is the honour of the Church: to me it is more precious than life ».

First Missionaries to B. C.

In 1837 while Superior General, he became the Bishop of Marseilles. Four years later he sent to Bishop Bourget of Montreal the first band of missionary Oblates. In 1847 he despatched the first group of Oblates to the mission fields of our Pacific Northwest. It was from these missions the Oblates came to what is now B. C. exactly one hundred years ago.

An insight into the difficulties met by the first Oblates as they began their labours among the Indians in the Northwest may be read in the letter of Father Chirouse (Nov. 18th 1855), written to his Superior. War had broken out between the Indians

and the American army. The missionaries were between two fires. Their lives were in constant peril from the warring Indians. Because of their association with the Indians, the whites accused them of abetting uprisings and massacres. Despite these dangers, four Oblates, Pandosy and Durieu, Chirouse and Richard, clung to their posts. Suddenly the war with its killing, pillaging and burning enveloped them. The Indians retreated carrying away Pandosy and Durieu. Chirouse found himself in the vortex of battles, murders, plunderings and burnings. Constant fear precluded the possibility of rest. Anxiety for his brethren tormented him. The fearful sight of fires by day gave way to the terrible din of the night. The countryside was gripped in a reign of terror. It was then he penned these lines: « As yet none of us here has been killed, but we do not know from day to day. I know not how long our lives will be spared... I have not been able to get news of our other fathers. Rumour had it that Father Pandosy had been killed. Several people confirm this. Can it be true... For fifteen days I have not slept. Shall I be able to sleep tonight? Pray for us ».

These were the missions that were the crucible of the men of Mazenod - all of whom were later to become the greatest missionaries the mainland of British Columbia has ever known.

Demers Sets the Pace

The story of their advent into the life of the Church in B.C. has overtones of spiritual drama. For undoubtedly they played a major role in the crucial decision that Modeste Demers had to make on November 30, 1847.

Demers was the first missionary to explore the length and breadth of what is now our province. He

was a diocesan priest from Quebec. In 1838 he had come with Blanchet to administer to the whites of the lower Columbia.

No man living in 1847 knew the missionary problem of B.C. better than he. No man knew the hardships, the sacrifices, physical and mental, and the loneliness that must be the lot of the future pioneer priests.

As he travelled through British Columbia of that year he was appalled at the spiritual and moral plight of the Indians. These had been almost the sole object of his nine years ministry. But the whites had been penetrating his territory in gradually increasing numbers. They too were his responsibility. These, however, had some knowledge of the compassionate Christ and His Immaculate Mother. These could receive the comforting sacramental graces. But what of his natives - the savages who were prey to passion and mental stupor? Should not they be lead to the peace and joy of the omnipotent and merciful God?

He shuddered as he thought of the overwhelming responsibility of a bishop charged with a divine mandate to save every soul, to recruit priests, to build Churches and schools, to obtain Sisters to teach, to finance projects out of an empty purse - to be held accountable for every soul in his jurisdiction. Father Demers thanked God he had a bishop, even though far removed, upon whom he could unburden the problems of souls in his far flung territory.

So ran his thoughts when suddenly he received word that he was named the first Bishop of Vancouver Island with the mainland and Alaska as his episcopal jurisdiction. Now we can understand his protestations - his plaintive letter to a friend stating, « I do not know what terms I should use to express my misfortune... How wretched I am. What shall I

do? I wish not to accept... I do not feel I have the courage ».

What gave Bishop Demers the will and the courage to be consecrated November 30, 1847? Besides the grace of the Holy Spirit, there can be no doubt, that it was the well founded hope, if not assurance, of enlisting the men of Mazenod - the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. He had heard of their dedication to the poor, their zeal, their spirit of sacrifice. He knew that his confrere, Archbishop Blanchet, had importuned the Bishop of Marseilles for their services. Indeed four had already arrived, and the fame of their courage and ardour had become the talk of the episcopal residence in Oregon City.

Bishop Demers later disclosed this fact in a letter written to the Archbishop of Quebec in which he revealed that from the first moment he had begged the Bishop of Marseilles for his Oblate Fathers, who alone could supervise the Indian Missions to be established in his diocese. He concluded his letter with words that reflected his new courage « The Bishop of Marseilles knows (my need): it is enough for me ».

We can better gauge what this hope meant to the bishop when we remember that on the morning of his consecration he had not one priest in his diocese.

At last that hope saw fulfillment. In 1858 D'Herbomez took up residence in Esquimalt. Soon he was joined by three of the fathers who had survived the holocausts of the Indian uprising on the Umatilla - Fathers Chirouse, Pandosy and Richard. One would suspect that having lived through that harrowing ordeal that none of them would again court fear and anxiety by becoming missionaries to the natives. Well one year after their arrival we read of Father Chirouse visiting the Indians of Vancouver Island, bap-

tizing 400 children and inducing over 2000 adults publicly to renounce gambling, sorcery and murdering.

D'Herbomez Consecrated Bishop

Six years after their arrival Bishop Demers advised the Holy See to turn over the entire mainland to the Oblates. This illustrious bishop foresaw that only an army of inspired men, whose motto was to evangelize the poor, could cope with the demands of the numerous native tribes and with the needs of the growing population of whites. D'Herbomez was consecrated bishop of the mainland October 9, 1864.

What prophetic vision had Bishop Demers. Within 4 years this Oblate pioneer prelate blessed and opened 55 chapels for natives and whites. In so doing he opened the most thrilling chapters in the growth and development of the Church in British Columbia. Under the generalship of such missionary giants as D'Herbomez, Durieu and Dontenwill, the foundations of the future dioceses and vicariates were well and gloriously laid. Go where you will from the blue Pacific to the snow-capped Rockies and you will find monuments to these intrepid and zealous pioneer prelates, priests and brothers. Walk the highways and byways in the most remote and inaccessible places and you will discover you are walking in the footsteps of the missionaries of Mazenod.

Pope Pius XI has referred to them as « the specialists of the most difficult missions ». How unerringly true this is of the native missions in this province. Here you had people steeped in unbelievable depravity becoming men and women of deep faith, profound affection for God and His Church and with an almost fierce loyalty to His Vicar on earth. Their religious ardour towards the Eucharistic Christ was,

and is, reminiscent of the early Christians. This astonishing change in customs, beliefs and morals could have been wrought only by specialists, themselves steeped in apostolic faith and Christ-like love. Time obliterates many names and memories but time will never obliterate from the hearts of grateful Indians the names of those pioneer Oblates who lived and who died among them.

Only those who follow....

All who have read of the hardships and sacrifices of the early Oblate Missionaries are deeply impressed. But only those who have tried to follow in their footsteps really know what they endured and how they suffered from the deprivations of a primitive mode of life. One winter when I was stationed in the interior I was asked to officiate at a ceremony of blessing a Eucharistic Chief in a reserve that nestles under the Rockies in the upper Windermere Valley. As the weather was bitterly cold in that district I bundled myself in warm clothes and began the 100 mile drive in the Oblate Missionary's car.

My first discomfort was due to a lack of heater in the car. We drove on and on into ever increasingly colder weather. When we arrived at the log cabin which was to accommodate us, it was 40° below. The Indians generously shared their food with us which the good father ate with an enviable relish. Finally it was time to retire. I looked at the ancient and little wood stove and knew its heat would vanish in a matter of hours. I saw the inside of the door knob already white with thick frost and wondered if by morning I too would be of the same chaste whiteness. With a genuine fear of freezing to death I got under the covers fully clothed and as completely shod. My only consolation during the night was the heroism I could claim

when on the morrow I would return to the warmth of a parish rectory.

That night will never be forgotten, nor the ceremony in an equally cold church. As I returned to my accustomed comforts expecting the whole world to listen to my experience this realization suddenly struck me: Good God this is normal — this is routine with that missionary. Day in and day out this is his ministry. And even *his* mode of life is modern in comparison with that of those early missionaries who had no cars, no paved roads, no elementary conveniences even at the end of a hundred miles.

Only those *who follow* can possibly know what the Holy Father meant when he referred to their missions as the most difficult.

A Salute to the Oblates

This Centennial year proudly surveys the ecclesiastical divisions of what once was the Vicariate of Bishop D'Herbomez — now the Archdiocese of Vancouver, the diocese of Nelson, the diocese of Kamloops, the Vicariate of Prince Rupert and the Vicariate of the Yukon.

Proudly today we salute those who built with their blood and tears, their hardships and sacrifices, their faith and devotion — brave men who now slumber in lonely graves somewhere between ocean slopes and mountain tops. Gratefully we acknowledge that these are their glories, their crowns, imperishable and eternal.

Missionaries of Mazenod, how appropriate it is that this Mass of Thanksgiving is being offered by the Archbishop of Vancouver in the august presence of the personal representative of Our Supreme Pontiff, Pope Pius XII, for your lives gloriously and triumphantly echo the aspiration of your holy Founder. « The honour of the Holy Roman Pontiff is the honour of the Church: to me it is more precious than life. »